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ABSTRACT

As the English article system is one of the most difficult grammatical items for Japanese learners of English to acquire (Japanese has no article system), this paper explored the accuracy order of articles in English by 141 Japanese speakers. A secondary purpose was to examine if these second language results extend Cziko's 1986 proposal that (first) language learners may overgeneralize the definite article into first-mention contexts because they initially associate the definite article with a specific feature; the task-related variation is also investigated. Subjects were given a fill-in-the-blank test and a composition test. Findings indicate that subjects acquired definite articles more accurately than indefinite articles, especially on the fill-in-the-blank test. This result extends Cziko's proposal to second language learners. No statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio was noted. It is suggested that teachers in Japan should keep in mind that indefinite articles and generic nouns are difficult to acquire; that learners may understand discoursal cohesiveness easily; that learners tend to overproduce the definite article into first-mention contexts; and that learners may not develop proficiencies concerning the article system over a 1-year period, when no formal instruction on articles has been given. (Contains 17 references.) (NAV)

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Acquisition of English articles by Japanese EFL learners

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Acquisition of English Articles By Japanese EFL Learners

Mikio Kubota

Abstract

The primary purpose of this classroom research is to explore the accuracy order of articles, the secondary purpose is to examine whether the current experiment will apply to L2 acquisition data Cziko's (1986) proposal that L1 learners may overgeneralize the definite article into first-mention contexts because they initially associate the definite article with the [+SR] feature, and the final purpose is to investigate the task-related variation. A total of 141 EFL college students in Japan participated in this experiment. Two types of tests – the fill-in-the blank test and the composition test – were given.

The following findings emerge from this study:

(1) The subjects acquired definite articles more accurately than indefinite articles, at least on the fill-in-the-blank test.

(2) There was a statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio among the features: [-SR +HK], [-SR -HK], [+SR -HK], [+SR +HK], on both the fill-in-the-blank test and the current composition test.

(3) The [+SR +HK] feature was the easiest, whereas the [-SR +HK] feature was the most difficult, on the fill-in-the-blank test.

The data on the fill-in-the-blank test warrant the following orderings:

[-SR +HK] < [-SR -HK] & [+SR -HK] < [+SR +HK]

(4) Accuracy ratio on the current composition test was not significantly different from that on the previous year's composition test in each feature.

(5) The definite article was overproduced in the [+SR -HK] feature rather than in the [-SR -HK] feature on both the fill-in-the-blank test and the current composition test.

This result extends Cziko's (1986) proposal to L2 data.

(6) No statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio was found between the fill-in-the-blank test and the current composition test.

The pedagogical implications in this research are that teachers in Japan ma keep in mind that (a) indefinite articles and generic nouns are difficult to acquire, (b) learners may understand the discoursal cohesiveness easily, (c) they tend to overproduce the definite article into first-mention contexts, and (d) they may not develop proficiencies concerning the article system over a one-year period, when no formal instruction on articles has been given.

1. *Introduction*

The English article system is considered one of the difficult grammatical items for Japanese learners of EFL (English as a foreign language) to acquire, because there is no article system in Japanese. It seems that the difficulty of article acquisition relys on the difference of cognitive processing between native speakers of English and non-native Japanese speakers of English: Japanese may process language on the noun level, but not on the noun countability level, whereas native speakers of English may process language on the noun countability level (Hiki 1994:48). In Japanese, there is no need to check whether a noun is singular or plural, or whether it is countable or uncountable (Mizuno 1985:24).

Huebner (1983) developed systems of analyzing articles in terms of universal

features of referentiality (special referent and assumed known to the hearer), which were originally proposed by Bickerton (1981). Semantic functions of articles depend on whether or not the noun phrase has a specific referent, and whether or not the noun is assumed to be identifiable by the hearer. Hence, nouns are classified as plus or minus specific referent ([± SR]) and plus or minus assumed known to the hearer ([± HK]). The lexical properties of the noun (singular or plural, mass or count) determine article choice from among the possiblities available in a given environment (Thomas 1989:336). Table 1 presents a classification system in terms of two binary features (Thomas 1989:336). Nouns classified as [-SR +HK] are generic nouns and are marked with *a*, *the*, *ø* (zero article). Nouns classified as [-SR -HK] are nonreferential nouns and are marked with *a*, *ø*. These articles are used with nouns that name a class to which another noun is asserted to belong or that refer to an unspecified member of a class (Thomas 1989:336). The [+SR -HK] feature includes referential indefinite nouns, which are marked with *a*, *ø*. The referent is identifiable not to the hearer but to the speaker, who is entering the noun into the discourse for the first time. Finally, the [+SR +HK] feature includes referential definite nouns which are previously mentioned, are specified by entailment or definition, and are unique in all contexts or in a given context, etc (Thomas 1989:337). These nouns are marked with *the* (see Huebner 1983; Thomas 1989 for more information on these four environments).

Features	Environment	Articles	Examples
[-SR +HK]	Generic nouns	*a, the, ø*	*ø Fruit* flourishes in the valley. *The Grenomian* is an excitable person. *A paper clip* comes in handy.
[-SR -HK]	Nonreferential nouns attributive indefinites nonspecific indefinites (etc.)	*a, ø*	Alice is *an accountant.* I guess I should buy *a new car.*
[+SR -HK]	Referential indefinites first-mention nouns	*a, ø*	Chris approaches me carrying *a dog.*
[+SR +HK]	Referential definites previous mention	*the*	*The dog* jumped down and started barking.
	specified by entailment		I approached his front door and rang *the bell.*
	specified by definition		*the latest crisis; the top drawer*
	unique in all contexts		*The moon* will be full tomorrow
	unique in a given context		Among employees: *the boss;* among classmate: *the midterm exam*
	(etc.)		

Table 1. Four environments for articles (Thomas 1989:337)

L1 acquisition studies of articles indicate that children often use definite rather than indefinite articles when introducing a noun for the first time (Brown 1973:353; Warden 1976:109; Power/Dal Martello 1986:150; Karmiloff-Smith 1979: 144), because the child's "egocentricity" in the sense that the child assumes whatever is known to him/her is known to the hearer shapes the frequent use of the definite article (Cziko 1986:881) and they associate *the* with the [+SR] feature and *a* with the [-SR] feature (Cziko 1986:896).

L2 naturalistic data show that *the* is acquired first and *a* later (Master 1987; Parrish 1987), and that *the* is overgeneralized in the [+SR -HK] feature rather than in the [-SR -HK] feature (Huebner 1983; Master 1987; Thomas 1989). Huebner (1983: 144) and Master (1987) speculated that the subjects associated *the* with the [+HK] feature rather than the [+SR] feature. Furthermore, Huebner (1983:142) observed early "flooding" of the definite article in all noun features in a year-long study, and found that *the*-flooding receded first in the [-SR -HK] feature and later in the [+SR -HK] feature, while the subject continued to use *the* in the [+SR +HK] and [-SR +HK] features. Master (1987), studying the use of English articles by 20 ESL learners in spontaneous speech, reported that ø dominates in all features for articles in the early stages of L2 acquisition, at least for learners whose L1 doesn't include articles. Parrish (1987) collected the oral data of one Japanese woman longitudinally, and observed that the appropriate use of the definite article was 84%, while that of the indefinite one was 50%, thus concluding the early acquisition of the definite article. Thomas (1989) studied 30 adult ESL learners and found that they overgeneralized the definite article in first-mention contexts, because they may have associated *the* with the [+SR] feature like L1 learners do and later they may have learned the relevance of the [±HK] feature to the English article system.

Yamada and Matsuura (1982) studied Japanese EFL learners (35 senior high school students and 35 college students) by using the fill-in-the-blank test, reporting that the accuracy ratio was high in the definite article and that they may have overgeneralized it. Hiki (1990) examined the judgment of noun countability made by 61 Japanese college students, employing the editing test. It was shown that the mean accuracy rate was significantly different between the

countable and uncountable environments, and that the effect of countability environment significantly varied from noun class to noun class. Therefore, it was concluded that Hiki's study provided evidence that there is a difference in the difficulty of choosing the right article (*a* or *ø*) related to countability environment and the interaction between noun class and countability environment.

In this research, I will investigate the characteristics of article use by Japanese college students of EFL from the perspectives of the [± SR] and [± HK] features.

2. *THE STUDY*

The primary purpose of this research is to explore the accuarcy order of articles, the secondary purpose is to examine whether the current experiment will apply to L2 acquisition data Cziko's (1986) proposal that L1 learners may overgeneralize the definite article into first-mention contexts because they initially associate *the* with the [+SR] feature, and the final purpose is to investigate the task-related variation.

2.1. HYPOTHESES

Hypotheses 1 - 4 concern the primary purpose of the study, Hypothesis 5 is related to the secondary purpose, and Hypothesis 6 is concerned with the final purpose:

H1: There would be no statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio between the definite article and the indefinite article.

Previous research (Master 1987; Parrish 1987) indicate the following acquisition order from longitudinal perspectives: *the* is acquired first and *a* is acquired later. There has been only one research (Yamada and Matsuura 1982) to examine the accuracy ratio of articles from cross-sectional perspectives. Therefore, the null hypothesis is proposed. If it proves to be incorrect, the following alternative hypothesis will be tested:

H2: The accuracy ratio of the definite article would be statistically different from that of the indefinite article.

H3: There would be no statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio among the features: [-SR +HK], [-SR -HK], [+SR -HK], [+SR +HK].

Again, the null hypothesis is formulated, since no theory or research explains the difference.

H4: There would be no statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio between the previous year's composition test and the current composition test.

It is not expected that the subjects would improve the accuracy ratio of articles one year after the previous composition test. No formal instruction regarding the article systems had been given to the subjects for one year.

H5: The definite article would be overproducted in the [+SR -HK] feature rather than in the [-SR -HK] feature.

Huebner (1983), Master (1987), and Thomas (1989) found that *the* was overgeneralized in the [+SR -HK] feature rather than in the [-SR -HK] feature. Based on this result, this hypothesis is formulated in that the subjects would overproduce the definite article in the [+SR -HK] feature rather than in the [-SR -HK] feature. Note that overproduction of the definite article was examined, because no previous data of all the subjects (n=141) were obtained to investigate overgeneralization in this research.

H6: There would be a statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio between tasks.

Tarone and Parrish (1988) found that different tasks elicited different types of noun phrase, which in turn demanded different uses of the article, and that learner accuracy in the articles used with the [+SR +HK] feature increased across the three tasks. This result led to the formation of Hypothesis 6.

2.2. PROCEDURES

2.2.1. Subjects

141 Japanese college students participated in this experiment. They had studied EFL in classroom settings for six or seven years, and had already studied the usage of the English article system during junior and senior high school.

2.2.2. Data collection and analysis

The present research is a cross-sectional and longitudinal study, which analyzes articles: *a* (*an*), *the*, and ø. *A* and *an* are treated as allomorphs. First, the fill-in-the blank test was given to all the subjects. It was a five-minute test, where there were five items in each feature: [-SR +HK], [-SR -HK], [+SR -HK], [+SR +HK] (see Appendix).

Second, the twenty-minute composition test was given to all the subjects. The title was "New Year's Day." In addition, the data of 57 subjects who had written compositions about "Travel" one year before the current composition test were examined in order to explore the progress. The number of articles was counted for the analysis. Idioms containing articles, and proper nouns were excluded from the analysis.

The t-test, the one-way ANOVA, the sign test, and the χ^2 test were performed to analyze the data.

3. *RESULTS*

Table 2 shows means and standard deviations of *a* and *the* on the fill-in-the-blank test. On the fill-in-the-blank test, the mean was 8.35 in the indefinite article and 4.79 in the definite article. Because the number of items was different (12 vs. 6), the raw mean of the definite article was weighed by a factor of 2.0; with this weighting established, the mean of the definite article was 9.58. The difference between the indefinite and definite articles was statistically significant ($t=18.05$, $p<.05$, two-tailed; $t_{critical}=1.980$).

Table 3 lists frequencies of *a*, *the*, or ø in each feature on the current composition test. On the current composition test, the accuracy ratio was 73.0% for indefinite article and 92.0% for definite article, as shown in Table 4. The data demonstrate that there was no statistically significant difference between them ($\chi^2=2.18$, df=1, $p>.05$ (ns); $\chi^2_{critical}=3.84146$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 was only partly upheld, thereby Hypothesis 2 was partly supported in that the definite article was easier to acquire than the indefinite article only on the fill-in-the-blank test.

	Number of subjects	Number of items	Mean	Standard Deviation
a	141	12	8.35	1.62
the	141	6	4.79	2.01

$t=18.05$, $p<.05$, two-tailed; $t_{critical}=1.980$
a : Nos. 1, 3, 4, 5, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 19
the: Nos. 2, 6, 10, 11, 17, 20

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of each article on fill-in-the-blank test

	Target article	Total	*a*	*the*	ø
[-SR +HK]	*a*	0	0	0	0
	the	2	0	2	0
	ø	0	0	0	0
[-SR -HK]	*a*	175	131	8	36
	ø	2	2	0	0
[+SR -HK]	*a*	69	47	12	10
	ø	0	0	0	0
[+SR +HK]	*the*	174	3	160	11

Table 3. Frequencies of *a*, *the*, or ø in each feature on current composition test (n=141)

	% (frequencies)
a	73.0% (178)
the	92.0% (162)

$x^2=2.18$, df=1, $p>.05$ (ns); $x^2_{critical}=3.84146$

Table 4. Accuracy ratio of *a* and *the* on fill-in-the-blank test

Table 5 lists means and standard deviations in each feature on the fill-in-the-blank test. The mean was 2.72 in [-SR +HK], 3.57 in [-SR -HK], 3.77 in [+SR -HK], and 4.28 in [+SR +HK]. Table 6 shows the results of one-way ANOVA on the fill-in-the-blank test. The results indicate that feature differences were statistically significant ($F=14.11$, $p<.05$; $F_{3,560}(.05)=2.6049$).

Multile comparisons (using LSD: least square differences) were made in order to determine which features significantly differed from each other. The results of between-feature comparisons of means on the fill-in-the-blank test are shown in Table 7. The data reveal the following orderings:

[-SR +HK] < [-SR -HK] & [+SR -HK] < [+SR +HK]

Therefore, it was found that there was a statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio among the features: [-SR +HK], [-SR -HK], [+SR -HK], [+SR +HK], on the fill-in-the-blank test.

	Number of items	Mean	Standard Deviation
[-SR +HK]	5	2.72	1.19
[-SR -HK]	5	3.57	1.00
[+SR -HK]	5	3.77	1.10
[+SR +HK]	5	4.28	0.77

[-SR +HK]: Nos. 3, 9, 15, 18, 20
[-SR -HK]: Nos. 1, 5, 8, 13, 16
[+SR -HK]: Nos. 4, 7, 12, 14, 19
[+SR +HK]: Nos. 2, 6, 10, 11, 17

Table 5: Means and standard deviations in each feature on fill-in-the-blank test

Source	SS	df	MS	F	p
Feature	178.16	3	59.39	14.11	<.05
Residual	588.75	560	4.21		
Total	766.91	563			

$F_{3,560}(.05)=2.6049$

Table 6: Results of one-way ANOVA on fill-in-the-blank test

Mean	Feature	[-SR +HK]	[-SR -HK]	[+SR -HK]	[+SR +HK]
2.72	[-SR +HK]				
3.57	[-SR -HK]	*			
3.77	[+SR -HK]	*			
4.28	[+SR +HK]	*	*	*	

* p<.05

Table 7: Between-feature comparisons of means on fill-in-the-blank test

Table 8 shows accuracy ratio of each feature on the current composition test. The data demonstrate that there was a statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio among features (χ^2=8.17, df=3, $p<.05$; $\chi^2_{critical}$=7.81473). Accordingly, Hypothesis 3 was upheld. Ryan's method indicates that there was a statistically significant difference between the [-SR +HK] and [+SR -HK] features (p=0.0028; α'=0.0083); however, this analysis was not taken into account because the frequencies were too small (n=2) to permit accurate probability measurement.

	%	(frequencies)
[-SR +HK]	100.0%	(2)
[-SR -HK]	74.0%	(131)
[+SR -HK]	68.1%	(47)
[+SR +HK]	92.0%	(160)

x^2=8.17, df=3, p<.05; $x^2_{critical}$=7.81473

Table 8: Accuracy ratio of each feature on current composition test (n=141)

Table 9 illustrates frequencies of *a*, *the*, or *ø* used in each feature on the current and the previous year's composition tests in one class (n=57). Tables 10 and 11 display accuracy ratios of *a* and *the* and accuracy ratios of each feature on the current and previous year's composition tests in one class. As shown in Table 10, the data reveal that the accuracy ratios of indefinite articles and definite articles were 83.0% and 91.5% respectively. On the previous year's test the accuracy ratios of indefinite and definite articles were 77.3% and 95.5% respectively. The differencies were not statistically significant (χ^2=0.28, df=1, p>.05 (ns); $\chi^2_{critical}$=3.84146). Furthermore, as displayed in Table 11, there was no statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio of each feature between the current and previous year's composition tests (χ^2=3.46, df=3, p>.05 (ns); $\chi^2_{critical}$=7.81473). Accordingly, Hypothesis 4 was upheld.

		Current test				Previous year's test			
	Target article	Total	*a*	*the*	ø	Total	*a*	*the*	ø
[-SR +HK]	*a*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	the	1	0	1	0	2	0	2	0
	ø	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
[-SR -HK]	*a*	83	70	2	11	66	49	2	15
	ø	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
[+SR -HK]	*a*	17	13	3	1	9	9	0	0
	ø	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
[+SR +HK]	*the*	81	1	74	6	87	0	83	4

Table 9: Frequencies of *a*, *the*, or ø used in each feature on current and previous year's composition tests in one class (n=57)

	Current test	Previous year's test
	% (frequencies)	% (frequencies)
a	83.0% (83)	77.3% (58)
the	91.5% (75)	95.5% (85)

χ^2=0.28, df=1, p>.05 (ns); $\chi^2_{critical}$=3.84146

Table 10: Accuracy ratio of *a* and *the* on current and previous year's composition tests in one class (n=57)

	Current test	Previous year's test
	% (frequencies)	% (frequencies)
[-SR +HK]	100.0% (1)	100.0% (2)
[-SR -HK]	84.3% (70)	74.2% (49)
[+SR -HK]	76.4% (13)	100.0% (9)
[+SR +HK]	91.3% (74)	95.4% (83)

χ^2=3.46, df=3, p>.05 (ns); $\chi^2_{critical}$=7.81473

Table 11: Accuracy ratio of each feature on current and previous year's composition tests in one class (n=57)

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Table 12 lists the numbers of correct responses in the [-SR -HK] and [+SR -HK] features on the fill-in-the-blank test. The data indicate that the subjects produced the definite article incorrectly 43 times totally in the [-SR -HK] feature and 113 times totally in the [+SR -HK] feature. The sign test revealed that there was a statistically significant difference between them ($z=4.03$, $p<.05$, two-tailed; $z_{critical}=1.96$).

On the current composition test, in the [-SR -HK] feature the ratio of the definite article used was 4.6%, while in the [+SR -HK] feature it was 17.4%, as illustrated in Table 13. There was a statistically significant difference between them on the current composition test ($\chi^2=7.44$, $df=1$, $p<.05$; $\chi^2_{critical}=3.84146$). Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was supported on both the fill-in-the-blank test and the current composition test in that the definite article was overproduced in the [+SR -HK] feature rather than in the [-SR -HK] feature.

	Total	*a*	*the*	ø
[-SR -HK]	705	503	43*	159
[+SR -HK]	705	531	113*	61

*z=4.03, p<.05, two-tailed; $z_{critical}$=1.96 (sign test)

Table 12: Correct responses in [-SR -HK] and [+SR -HK] features on fill-in-the-blank test

	Total	*a*	*the*	ø
		% (frequencies)	% (frequencied)	% (frequencies)
[-SR -HK]	(175)	74.9% (131)	4.6%* (8)	20.6% (36)
[+SR -HK]	(69)	68.1% (47)	17.4%* (12)	14.5% (10)

*χ^2=7.44, df=1, p<.05; $\chi^2_{critical}$=3.84146

Table 13: Ratio of the definite article in [-SR -HK] and [+SR -HK] features on current composition test (n=141)

Table 14 shows accuracy ratio of article use on the fill-in-the-blank test and the current composition test. The data demonstrate that no statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio was found between the fill-in-the-blank test and the current composition test (χ^2=10.52, df=7, p>.05 (ns); $\chi^2_{critical}$=14.0671). Hence, Hypothesis 6 was not upheld.

	Fill-in-the-blank test	Current composition test	Difference of means
	% (number of correct responses)	% (frequencies)	%
[-SR +HK]	54.4% (2.72)	100.0% (2)	45.6%
[-SR -HK]	71.4% (3.57)	74.9% (131)	3.5%
[+SR -HK]	75.4% (3.77)	68.1% (47)	7.3%
[+SR +HK]	85.6% (4.28)	92.0% (160)	6.4%

χ^2=10.52, df=7, p>.05 (ns); $\chi^2_{critical}$=14.0671

Table 14: Accuracy ratio of article use on fill-in-the-blank test and current composition test (n=141)

4. *DISCUSSION*

The following hypotheses were tested in this research:

H1: There would be no statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio between the definite article and the indefinite article.

H2: The accuracy ratio of the definite article would be statistically different from that of the indefinite article.

H3: There would be no statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio among the features: [-SR +HK], [-SR -HK], [+SR -HK], [+SR +HK].

H4: There would be no statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio between the previous year's composition test and the current composition test.

H5: The definite article would be overproducted in the [+SR -HK] feature rather than in the [-SR -HK] feature.

H6: There would be a statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio between tasks.

The following three points are worth mentioning regarding the primary purpose of the research: the first interesting finding is that the accuracy ratio of the definite article was significantly higher than that of the indefinite article on the fill-in-the-blank test, but not on the current composition test (Hypotheses 1 and 2). That is, it was found that it was easier for the Japanese EFL subjects to acquire definite articles than indefinite articles, at least on the fill-in-the-blank test. It should be noted that different tests produced different results, as Tarone and Parrish (1988) stated. Tarone and Parrish (1988:36) argued that task-related variation in interlanguage must be due, not to a single variable called "attention to form," but to a complex of factors, including the communicative function of particular forms which may vary with the communicative demands of the task and with the cohesiveness of the discourse produced in response to the task. Littlewood (1981) proposed three factors that may influence variation in interlanguage: the communicative function of a feature, the linguistic environment of that feature, and social/situational factors such as formality of situation and ability to attend to form. In this research, it seems that the degree of attention to form was higher on the fill-in-the-blank test, which elicited the receptive knowledge of the article system, than on the composition test, which elicited the

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productive knowledge, presumably because the subjects did not have sufficient time to attend to form while writing a composition within 20 minutes.

The second issue is that there was a statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio among the features: [-SR +HK], [-SR -HK], [+SR -HK], [+SR +HK], on both the fill-in-the-blank test and the current composition test (Hypothesis 3). The data on the fill-in-the-blank test warrant the following orderings:

[-SR +HK] < [-SR -HK], [+SR -HK] < [+SR +HK]

Hence, it was found that the [+SR +HK] feature was the easiest, whereas the [-SR +HK] feature (i.e., generic nouns) was the most difficult. It may be plausible to state that the subjects might have understood the discoursal cohesiveness easily, since "[d]iscourse considerations clearly play a decisive role in article selection in first and subsequent mention environments" (Master 1990:477).

The third important point is that there was no statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio between the current and the previous year's composition tests, the result of which supported Hypothesis 4. The result demonstrates that the subjects did not develop proficiencies concerning the article system over a one-year period, when no formal instruction had been given.

Moreover, concerning the secondary purpose of the research, Hypothesis 5 was supported in that the definite article was overproduced in the [+SR -HK] feature rather than in the [-SR -HK] feature on both the fill-in-the-blank test and the current composition test. It may be that when the subjects specified the referent, they marked the first-mention nouns with the definite article, simply because they identified the referent whether the audience was familiar with it or not. This does not show evidence to support the view of the child's "egocentricity" (Cziko 1986:881). The current result is in accord with the results of Huebner (1983), Master (1987), and Thomas (1989), and the current experiment applies to L2 acquisition data Cziko's (1986) proposal that L1 learners may overgeneralize the definite article into first-mention contexts because they initially associate the definite article with the [+SR] feature.

Finally, as for the third purpose of the research, no statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio was found between the fill-in-the-blank test and the current composition test, thereby Hypothesis 6 was not upheld. Accordingly, task-related variation was not obtained on the two tests in this research.

There have been mixed results regarding the association of the definite article

with features: Huebner (1983:144) and Master (1987) speculated that the subjects may have associated *the* with the [+HK] feature, however Thomas's (1989) findings associate *the* with the [+SR] feature which is linked to L1 learners. In this research no longitudinal data were obtained and no interview was conducted with the subjects, thereby it is not clear whether the subjects may have associated the definite article with [+SR] or with [+HK]. This topic remains at issue.

5. *CONCLUSION*

The following findings and pedagogical implications emerge from this classroom research, although it should be regarded as a pilot study owing to the following limitations (No. of tests given: 2; No. of subjects: 141):

(1) The subjects acquired definite articles more accurately than indefinite articles, at least on the fill-in-the-blank test.

(2) There was a statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio among the features: [-SR +HK], [-SR -HK], [+SR -HK], [+SR +HK], on both the fill-in-the-blank test and the current composition test.

(3) The [+SR,+HK] feature was the easiest, whereas the [-SR +HK] feature was the most difficult, on the fill-in-the-blank test.

The data on the fill-in-the-blank test warrant the following orderings:

[-SR +HK] < [-SR -HK] & [+SR -HK] < [+SR +HK]

(4) No statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio of each feature was found between the current and the previous year's composition tests.

(5) The definite article was overproduced in the [+SR -HK] feature rather than in the [-SR -HK] feature on both the fill-in-the-blank test and the current composition test.

This research applies to L2 acquisition data Cziko's (1986) proposal that L1 learners may overgeneralize the definite article into first-mention contexts.

(6) No statistically significant difference in accuracy ratio was found between the fill-in-the-blank test and the current composition test.

That is, task variation was not discovered on the two tests in this research.

The results pedagogically suggest that teachers in Japan may keep in mind that (a) indefinite articles and generic nouns are difficult to acquire, (b) learners may understand the discoursal cohesiveness easily, (c) they tend to overproduce the definite article into first-mention contexts, and (d) they may not

develop proficiencies concerning the article system over a one-year period, when no formal instruction on articles has been given.

Further research should include the follow-up interviews with subjects to discover the reason they answer incorrectly, and should investigate what kind of instruction may be effective in acquiring the article system.

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APPENDIX

TEST
(cf. Yasui 1985)

[1] Fill in the blanks with *a*, *an*, *the*, or ø.

1. Tom is ( ) accountant.
2. ( ) moon will be full tomorrow.
3. ( ) paper clip comes in handy.
4. I saw ( ) bench in the shade. I went to the bench and sat down.
5. There may be ( ) misprint in this book. Did anybody find one?
6. ( ) car I bought last year was very good.
7. As ( ) writer, I spend most of the time working in my house.
8. I want to catch ( ) fish in the pond.
9. ( ) honesty is the best policy.
10. There is a book on the table. ( ) book is about cooking.
11. ( ) latest new surprised me.
12. I found ( ) misprint on page 11. It is in line 13.
13. I guess I should buy ( ) new car.
14. Yesterday I saw ( ) lawyer. His name is John.
15. ( ) fruit is good for you.
16. Mary is eager to have ( ) baby.
17. I don't like studying. But I must study, because ( ) final exam is coming soon.
18. A box is ( ) container.
19. Kate approached me carrying ( ) cat. The cat was pretty.
20. Tennis is a good sport for ( ) old.

[2] Write a composition in English.